Don Fowler and the Glen Canyon Project

Formative Experiences

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As I was preparing my comments for the 2011 Society for American Archaeology (SAA) symposium that gave rise to this book, I thought back to my first SAA meeting. It was in spring 1959, and Don Fowler and I were both working for Jesse Jennings on the Glen Canyon Project (see Figure 3.1). The University of Utah was the host, and Jennings was the incoming president. It was the largest SAA meeting so far, with over 500 registrants. Don and I were in charge of projecting slides during the sessions. The revolutionary technology of the Kodak Carousel was still a couple of years away. The speakers, if they had slides, would hand us a bunch when they got up to speak, and we would either drop them one by one into a projector (if it was an old one) or load them into a straight tray (if it was the latest model). For some papers, the order of the slides did not make an appreciable difference. Multiple views of “Another Unusual Artifact from Yonapatawpa County” do not necessarily demand a particular sequence.

We have come a long way since those days. In addition to being far more numerous, SAA papers now are shorter and almost always better organized and better presented. PowerPoint is a big advance over the ancestors of the Carousel. Papers are more likely to be grouped into symposia. And more of the papers and symposia are planned in advance to be the first runs for eventual publication, as was the case here.

In the over five decades since Don and I showed slides at that SAA meeting, the field of American archaeology has expanded enormously—in numbers of active researchers, in the kinds of questions addressed and the methods used for addressing them, and especially, in detailed knowledge of the archaeological record. We use that last term in two senses—one is for the items and traces that got left in or on the ground by past peoples, but the other is the record we create as a result of observing and analyzing those things. And in turn, our ability to learn from those physical traces of the past is dependent on sets of techniques, methods, and theories.

The archaeological record created by our writings, databases, and conceptual frameworks is vastly larger and more complex than when Don and I entered the field. It provides more evidence on which to base generalizations but makes actually coming up with them harder. It was easier to propose a trend or a big unifying concept when we had only a few data points. Thus, since the 1950s, “doing archaeology” has become an increasingly complicated but increasingly ambitious and productive enterprise.

Essays of the sort included in this volume are invaluable in helping both experienced professionals and incoming students find vantage points from which they can review the large amount of work already done and plot ways forward to accomplish new research. Many of the chapters in this volume review, critically evaluate, and synthesize large amounts of published and unpublished empirical evidence—in some cases, paleoenvironmental and ethnographic as well as archaeological. Several explicitly evaluate and sort out the theoretical and methodological frameworks through which archaeologists attempt to make sense of what happened in the prehistoric Great Basin and Southwest. Still others document aspects of the history of archaeological research, a knowledge of which contributes greatly to understanding why problems and patterns are conceptualized the way they are.

Taken as a group, all the chapters proceed from the assumption that the main goal of archaeology is to provide substantive interpretations of what happened in the past based on empirical evidence. They are successful in helping us navigate portions of the complex landscape of knowledge that archaeology has generated in the decades since that 1959 SAA meeting. That this volume lives up to these standards is a tribute to Don Fowler, who played a role both in the careers of these authors and in varying degrees in the development of the data and the research questions they address in their essays. In fact, the development of the complex and dynamic field that is American archaeology today owes much to Don’s work over his career.

In the second chapter of this volume, Mel Aikens does a fine job of reviewing that remarkable career and the quality and diversity of Don’s accomplishments. Among other things, he describes Don’s early experience working for Jesse Jennings on the
University of Utah section of the Glen Canyon Archaeological Project (Mel also played a significant role in that work). The "GCP" was the megaproject of its time and one of the largest, if not the largest, of the reservoir salvage era. My comments are designed to complement Mel's and, in particular, to dwell on Don's Glen Canyon experiences and some of the parallels between his career and that of his mentor, Jesse Jennings. [I recently finished a retrospective piece on the GCP [Lipe 2012], so I have just undergone a self-taught refresher course on the way that project was organized and what it did [and did not] accomplish.] In the following pages, I will offer some speculations on how Don's experience on the GCP "preadapted" him to successfully pursue some of the topics and themes that characterize his subsequent career.

I first met Don in June 1958, when I showed up for work as a new crew chief on the GCP. Though still an undergraduate, Don already had one season of fieldwork in the Glen Canyon area under his belt. I put in four field seasons on the project—three on the same crews as Don—but he stayed with it for a total of six—longer than anyone else except Jennings. Don began as an undergraduate assistant to Jennings, helping get equipment and supplies ready to go to the field, but rapidly emerged as a central player in this very large and complex project. Being part of the GCP certainly influenced my subsequent career in many ways, and I think that this experience also gave Don some early opportunities that he later made the most of.

Don of course emerged from the GCP with lots of field experience and his first publications, and the core of his career has been organizing, finding, supervising, and publishing successful research undertakings. Jesse Jennings was a role model for how to effectively administer a very large project (see comments in Lipe 2012), although I think that Don usually found some "kinder and gentler" ways to motivate his people to do what needed to be done.

Several other aspects of Don's remarkably diverse career can perhaps also be traced back to the GCP days. These include building and effectively "working" a large personal network, understanding how to get things done efficiently, actively developing ways to bring the insights of archaeology to a broader public, becoming a leader in the transformation of "salvage" archaeology into modern "cultural resource management," and promoting a professional commitment to preserving archaeological and anthropological collections and records.
Don's early experience in helping Jennings get field projects equipped must have sharpened his intuitive understanding that if you wanted to get things done, you needed to find the person or persons who could best help you do it and then go talk to them. In other words, you needed to develop a network and then make use of it. His role as Jennings's part-time assistant also led to meetings during the academic year with visiting scholars and senior people from academia and the federal agencies involved in implementing this very large project.

I recall that among our 1958 field crew members, Don knew more significant people in archaeology and anthropology than those of us "old-timers" who already had a year or two of graduate work. He has both relied on and contributed to his very large network over the years, and it has included many movers and shakers in the political and business worlds, in addition to professional colleagues. I never saw Don's Rolodex back in the days when that was how you kept track of people, but it must have been a huge one. He still had a very loyal faith in the people who made the way. Don is the guy who keeps in touch with the survivors of the GCP and lets us know what is happening.

The GCP also gave Don the opportunity to develop, display, and be rewarded for his ability to get things done quickly and efficiently. This endeared him to Jesse Jennings, who thought that a lot of academic archaeologists spent too much time wallowing in irrelevant detail but that there was no room for that in a publicly funded salvage project with tight deadlines. (Actually, the opportunity to wallow in irrelevant detail was one of the things that had initially attracted me to the field of archaeology.) But Don learned early to identify the relevant details and not worry about the irrelevant ones. Along with his willingness to work very hard to achieve a goal, this is one of the traits that has made him so productive in so many different areas. We never took classes together, but I am sure that he must have been one of those students who always turn in their term papers a week early.

Another thing that Jennings stressed on the GCP was that salvage archaeology involved a public trust. That is, important evidence about the human past was being destroyed by a publicly financed development project, and public funds were being made available to record that evidence before it was lost. That required a serious commitment to coming up with results that reciprocated the public investment.

Jennings thought that the principal way this responsibility should be met was in the efficient production of timely publications that would increase knowledge of the distant past. However, he was also committed to more direct ways of sharing archaeological findings with a broader public. Shortly after joining the University of Utah faculty, he was involved in the formation of the Utah Statewide Archaeological Society, and he took the lead in organizing a small museum of anthropology. Later, he successfully lobbied (over a period of years) for establishment of the Utah Museum of Natural History (Jennings 1964:175–184).

His (1966) summary of the Glen Canyon Project was intended for an audience of non-specialists, and he published several other shorter pieces of this sort. He also spent a considerable amount of time producing three educational films on the GCP work. Though somewhat painful to watch in today's media-saturated environment, they nonetheless saw considerable use in classrooms and by avocational groups.

Don has taken to a new level the mission of bringing archaeology and the history of anthropological science directly to the public. Mel Aikens briefly summarizes a very long list of lectureships and speaking engagements, as well as his involvement in producing five major television documentaries—all of the latter having to do with John Wesley Powell and/or the Glen Canyon area. Fowler's recently published book, The Glen Canyon Country (2011), is a superb piece of public history—solid scholarship, written to be accessible to a very broad audience.

Throughout most of his career, Jennings was heavily engaged in shaping the field of salvage archaeology—from his early work in the Southeast, as president of the SAA, and through his tenure as the director of the very large and highly visible GCP. He (1965) published an influential article analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of salvage work (more of the former than the latter, in his opinion), as well as several less well-known pieces on this topic.

In a similar but even more effective fashion, Don Fowler has helped shape the transformation of salvage archaeology into the more comprehensive and proactive field of cultural resource management (CRM). In the "formative era" of this field, he published a number of seminal essays analyzing its practice and prospects (e.g., Fowler 1981, 1986). As president of the SAA, he continued the efforts begun by C. R. McGimsey to bring CRM to practitioners into the mainstream of the society's affairs. Through a long string of contracts, he helped make the University of Nevada—Reno a major player in CRM in the Great Basin. Concurrently, he founded or cofounded several broad-based cultural and natural preservation organizations in Nevada. And as founder and director (from 1987 to 2004) of the University of Nevada—Reno Continuing Education Program in Heritage Resources Management, he brought professional level training and refresher courses to thousands of cultural and natural heritage professionals located across the United States and in its Pacific territories.

In seeking funding for the Glen Canyon Project, Jennings had lobbied very hard and successfully for full financing of the production and publication of basic descriptive reports and for supporting the preparation of all collections and records for permanent curation. In those days, such requirements were often put aside on the frequently unfounded presumption that somehow the academic archaeologists involved—and their institutions—would see that these things happened. As a result of Jennings's foresight and commitment, the collections from the Utah GCP remain in very good order and accessible to researchers at the Utah Museum of Natural History.

Likewise, Don has worked hard and effectively for years to see that archaeological and anthropological records are adequately preserved for posterity (e.g., Fowler and Givens 1993).
This commitment undoubtedly stems in part from his experience working with archival materials in his studies of John Wesley Powell and of the development of anthropological science. On the other hand, those of us who were involved with the GCP came away thinking that proper curation and archiving were the expected standard, which was not generally true at the time and is still not true in some quarters. The efforts of Don and like-minded colleagues have gone a long way toward improving the situation.

Of course, Don's successes over his career have been the product of his own diligence and capabilities, so none of this is intended to diminish his accomplishments. However, having Jesse Jennings as a mentor and literally growing up in the context of a very large, well-organized public archaeological project certainly didn't hurt. The areas of Don's engagement that I have highlighted are all seen today as important parts of American archaeology, and he has played a large role in making that happen.

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